

Arvind Gupta's Toys Have The World's Children Thinking?

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Toronto: India's acclaimed social entrepreneur, award- winning science educator and maker of educational toys from trash, Arvind Gupta, will be the main speaker at the International Conference on October 1st, 2016 organized by the IIT Alumni of Canada (IITAC). Gupta who is an IITian himself, has inspired tens of thousands of children around the world to make their own toys using common household trash, and to learn about science in the process. Sir Ken Robinson, a legendary expert on education and creativity, rated Mr. Gupta's TED talk as one of the top ten talks on education.

Mr. Gupta's website www.ArvindGuptaToys.com has more than 7100 free instructional videos for making toys, in English, Hindi, Chinese, Spanish, Russian, French, Japanese, and fourteen other languages.

During his visit to Canada, he will also be speaking at the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education (OISE), and at the Canadian headquarters of Scientists in School, the organization that promotes science in junior and middle schools. He will also hold a public workshop for children at the SVBF Community Centre on October 2nd, which is very apt because Mr. Gupta is a khadi-wearing, jholacarrying evangelist for peace and nonviolence.

Interview

Why toys, of all the things that you can teach children with? Did it come to you as a 'revelation'? What was your own favourite toy, growing up? Most science text books are downright boring and children seldom get a chance to work with their hands to make simple models. However, all children love to play with toys. Play is actually very serious business. India has a long tradition where children have made their own toys. Many of these toys are made from discarded materials old paper, magazines, bottle caps, cycle tubes etc. On the one hand the children imbibe environmental sensitivities of recycling while they also learn important principles of science.

The idea is that the child's first steps in science should be extremely joyous so that the child is fascinated and hooked to science for life. There are many traditional toys which give children a "feel" for science balancing toys, spinning tops, flying models etc.

Children also learn a great deal without being taught. If a child can spin a top competently then she has intuitively grasped many underlying scientific principles. Later on they can be reinforced with theory.

Why toys? The horrendous way science and math is taught in schools it gives children a lifetimes hatred for these beautiful subjects. With toys we can lure them back.

There is some concern that in today's India science is being smothered by religion. Do you see signs of a fuller development of the 'scientific temper' that the Constitution mentions, among the children, especially from the disadvantaged sections?

India is a religious country and of late there has been a resurgence in various religions. Religion also gives the masses a moral compass values to do good to others. Today the middle classes in India with all their insecurities are being drawn to many self styled saints and godmen. As they say in India BABA BAZAR GARAM HAI.

The human mind can often navigate both science and religion assimilating them in the process. One example will suffice. Michael Faraday son of a blacksmith later rose to become the President of the Royal Society in England. His researches in various and diverse branches of science were so fundamental that had he been alive today he would have a few Noble prizes.

Yet Faraday was a very deeply religious man. He believed in some obscure sect and remained very loyal to it. I love Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris both spearheading the atheist movement. But by writing a few books the deep religiosity of people does not get dented.

The Indian state has failed to develop a scientific temper. This Nehruvian dream lies devastated. Will this be your lifelong project? What is your next stage?

I have worked on this for over 30 years. I hope to continue designing science toys using scrap to help the poorest children on earth. There is a dearth of good books in Hindi. Over the years I have translated 184 books in Hindi. I will continue doing that because it is a great source of satisfaction for me. I have translated 25 books by Isaac Asimov the greatest popular science writer the world has ever known into Hindi.